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MR. EUGENE A. CONWELL read the following Paper :—

ON AN INSCRIBED CROMLEAC NEAR RATHKENNY, CO. MEATH.

AT page 105 in the late Dr. O'Donovan's manuscript letters, containing information "relative to the antiquities of the county Meath, collected during the progress of the Ordnance Survey in 1836," reference is made to a very remarkable cromleac in these words :—

"Near Rathkenny House are two large stones, which, though described in Name Book, p. 23, as part of a cromleac, are not known, however, by that name among the people. They are sometimes called large stones, and are said to have been thrown from Tara Hill by Fionn Mac Cumhail."

From the fact of the stone which forms the subject of the present notice being about twenty tons in weight, and its distance from the Hill of Tara, in a northerly direction, about eighteen statute miles, the correctness of the above information may be very fairly doubted. This—improbable, nay, impossible as it is—is all that the country people, up to the present day, can tell you respecting the remarkable memento of very remote ages which still exists at Rathkenny.

Seeing mentioned on the Ordnance Map of the district about Rathkenny, which is a village lying four miles N. W. from the town of Slane, what is there marked as a "Druid's Altar," I had the curiosity to visit the place on the 27th February, 1865; and I was astonished to find that the singular and elaborate inscriptions on this cromleac had not attracted previous notice.

On the 11th March following I spent several hours in a fruitless attempt to get a good rubbing of the upper surface of the slab, although I succeeded in taking accurate rubbings of seven circles on the under side, and of seven other circles picked on the opposite face of the single upright stone against which it leans. The circles on the under surface are not on, or about, the middle of the large slab, but nearer to the lower edge of the stone, which rests upon the ground, than to the upper portion of it. In Plate X., fig. 1, their relative positions are shown, the circles being nearly one-twelfth of the actual size.

The single upright stone against which the cromleac slab rests stands about four feet over ground, is four feet broad where it emerges from the ground, tapers slightly as it ascends, and varies from eighteen inches to two feet in thickness. The interior face of this supporting stone presents the appearance of having been picked all over with minute hollows for the purpose of ornamentation; and the seven circles hollowed out on this face are grouped in the manner shown in Plate X., fig. 2, being there represented nearly one-twelfth of their actual size.

The construction of the circles is rude and irregular, formed by lines about half an inch in breadth, and about a quarter of an inch in depth, which appear to have been picked out of the stone with a metallic implement.

Plate XI., fig. 4, is a representation of this unique monument, as it stands on elevated ground in the centre of a green field called *Capnín cuill*, i. e. "*the little carn of hazel*"—the name, no doubt, originally applied to the cromleac itself, from having some hazel trees formerly growing round it, but which afterwards extended to the field.\* It is 272 yards in an easterly direction from the residence of E. H. Hussey, Esq., the proprietor of the estate.

The large flag itself measures ten feet ten inches long, eight feet six inches broad, and is three feet thick, with one edge resting on the ground, and the other upon the upright or supporting stone before described; it is inclined to the horizon at an angle of  $37^{\circ}$ , and faces N. N. E.

Both stones constituting this monument consist of the natural bed surface of lower Silurian rock, greenish grey calcareous grit, slightly micaceous, which is found in abundance in the neighbourhood.

In the month of August last my friend Mr. Du Noyer accompanied me to Rathkenny, and made a very careful drawing of all the characters on the upper surface of the slab, which I was previously unable to record by means of a rubbing. To secure extreme accuracy we divided the face of the stone into square feet, by transverse lines of white twine, fastened on the extremities of the stone by ordinary shoemakers' wax. Having paper ruled off in square inches, there was no difficulty in making a correct transcript of the entire face of the stone, the characters on which will be more intelligible from an examination of the drawing than any words could make them (Plate XII., fig. 5).

It will be observed that there are upwards of three hundred depressions, or cup-shaped hollows, which, although in several instances they take the form of grouping, may be merely the result of weathering, and not artificial. Having been so long exposed to the wasting action of the weather, it would now be hazardous to pronounce with certainty upon this point. It is, however, very remarkable that all these depressions are distinct from, yet interspersed with, the singular collection of inscribed lines which cover the face of this stone. These lines, consisting of upwards of ninety separate characters, still exhibit the original clean and smooth cutting—for the most part in a triangularly shaped hollowed line—some to the depth of nearly a quarter of an inch; and are, to all appearance, the delicate workmanship of some sharp metallic tool, bearing a strong contrast in style of execution to the rude sculpturing of the circles.

I am not presumptuous enough to make any attempt at offering an explanation of the reading or meaning of these mysterious characters, yet I am not without hope that a key to their interpretation will be found, and I trust at no very distant day. We cannot but admire the perseverance and success of philologists in developing affinities in the languages of various nations from the shores of the Pacific to Western

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\* It has also been supposed that the name may have reference to the local tradition, and may mean "*the little carn of Finn Mac Cumhaill*."

Europe. Over the same vast region there is often a particular, and always a general, resemblance in the megalithic memorials which have come down to us from unrecorded ages. The similarity of popular tales, legends, and superstitions will also show the early connexion of the ancestors of many nations which are now geographically remote. Nearly two thousand years ago Pliny has recorded the similarity of the magical arts of the British Druids and the Persian Magi; and we are all familiar with the close resemblance between many of the Irish and Oriental popular superstitions and beliefs. That the characters engraved on this cromleac are Oriental, I have little doubt; but, not being an Oriental scholar, I commit the task of pursuing the investigation to those competent to deal with such a question.

Although inscribed cromleacs have hitherto received little attention from antiquarian writers and investigators, I trust the publication of this present notice may lead to a re-examination and comparison of all such remaining records of prehistoric times, wherever they are known to exist; and no doubt many such will be discovered by those who know what they may expect to find on cromleacs.

Up to the present time, these ancient monuments have been examined and classified rather in relation to the mode of their construction, &c., than with the hope of finding upon them incised records in lines, cup-like hollows, &c., which might lead to a fuller elucidation of their history. Since it is known that some of them at least contain such characters, would it not be highly interesting that antiquaries, in every country—in Asia, Africa, and Europe—where cromleacs still exist, should most carefully examine them, for the purpose of comparing every record they may be found to contain? Some clue to the reading of such characters may then turn up, as trustworthy as the celebrated Rosetta Stone\* afforded to the interpreters of the hieroglyphics in the Pyramids of Egypt.

About a year ago, the late John Windele, Esq., of Cork, sent me a sketch of the characters on an inscribed cromleac near Macroom, the similarity between which and that near Rathkenny is very striking. I regret I am not able to enter into fuller particulars respecting the Cork cromleac; but, not having seen it, I content myself with submitting Mr. Windele's sketch (Plate XI., fig. 3).

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\* The Rosetta Stone, now in the British Museum, is a slab of basalt, about 3 feet long, and  $2\frac{1}{2}$  feet broad. It was found near Rosetta, on the western mouth of the Nile, in the year 1800, and appears to have been placed originally in a temple dedicated to ATUM, by the monarch NECHAO. It exhibits three inscriptions, of the same import, — namely, one in hieroglyphics (some of which are lost by a portion of the stone having been broken off at the right-hand upper corner); another, in the Egyptian written character, called Demotic or Enchorial (this part of the stone being quite perfect); and a third, in the Greek language (a portion of which is also lost by a fracture at the right-hand lower corner of the stone). These inscriptions, furnishing the key to the deciphering of the Hieroglyphical and Demotic characters of Egypt, record the services which Ptolemy the Fifth (Epiphanes) rendered to his country. He is commended for his piety, his liberality to the temples, his victories, his remission of arrears of taxes and diminution of the imposts, and his protection of the lands by dams against the inundations of the Nile. He reigned between B. C. 205 and B. C. 182.

In our present state of archæological knowledge it would be almost idle to speculate as to the age of these monuments, or the people by whom they have been erected. By some they are called Celtic, and the people who erected them Celts; while others hold that they have been raised by a people ethnologically different from the Celts—*cromleac* building and burying being a form of sepulture in all probability practised before the arrival of the Celt, as it has been certainly followed in countries where neither Celt nor any other branch of the Aryan or Indo-European race ever penetrated; for we find such in Syria, and along the northern coast of Africa. The race that erected *cromleacs* must have been much more widely diffused over the world's surface than the Celtic, and in all probability that race existed in our own country before the Celts.

Le Baron A. de Bonstetten, in his "*Essai sur les Dolmens*," published at Geneva last year, at pp. 5, 6, 7, &c., enters minutely into the classification and description of the various kinds of existing *cromleacs* (*dolmen* being the word adopted on the Continent to signify what in the British Isles we call a *cromleac*). Unless we suppose the monument near Rathkenny to be a *cromleac in ruins*, we cannot bring it under this most recent and carefully studied classification of such remains.

If we adopt the meaning of the term *cromleac*, which probably has come to us through the Welsh, to be a *leaning stone*, or *inclined stone*, I am disposed to think that this monument near Rathkenny is perfect as it now stands; that it never consisted of more than the two stones; and that this may be a type of monument not hitherto noticed or described. I am the more impressed with this belief, because up to about thirty years ago another slab, popularly remembered as very similar, nearly, but not quite, as large as that just described, and facing in the same direction, existed in an adjoining field, at a point 275 yards south-east from the present one. What mystic characters it may, or may not, have contained inscribed upon it no one now can tell. The man—Christy Downey—still lives, who, in his zeal for agricultural improvement, subjected this stone to the operation of blasting; and its *debris* were afterwards worked up into fences and drains. He states that in the act of blasting "this stone was raised *entire* into the air for about six feet above the surface of the ground, and it then broke into pieces."

There was also a third "big stone," of still smaller dimensions, which he describes as lying quite flat, and about two perches to the east of the one just mentioned as destroyed. From what he saw in the destruction of the first stone he would not undertake to break or to blast this one, though less in size than the other. He therefore dug a deep pit on one side of it; and when in the act of prizing the stone into the pit, he says that "such a whirlwind came about my legs as astonished me; and I saw the effects of the wind on the surface for six or eight perches all round." Under the centre of the stone, he states, "there was a cavity of about the size of a good pot, with black mould

in it, and a horseshoe on one side of the cavity, and a broken glass bottle on the other." Both horseshoe and bottle, I presume, found their way there in modern times.

The subject of our present notice was also doomed; but, on the night preceding the day intended for commencing operations upon it, Christy strolled out from his cottage, and, looking towards the scene of his next day's projected labour, saw *a light* in the direction of "the big stone," there being low marshy ground in the neighbourhood immediately beyond. He returned to his home, and came to the wise conclusion, from all that he had seen, that it would be dangerous to interfere further with these "sacred stones." So, after one of these primitive monuments having been blasted, and another buried, to the fortuitous appearance and the lucky intervention of the *ignis fatuus* we are at the present day indebted for the preservation of the singular vestige of our nation's early history which I have feebly endeavoured to lay before the Academy.

Several raths or forts are in the immediate vicinity; and tradition states that there are also several subterranean caves, which I have not had either the time or the opportunity to find out or to investigate.

The Secretary brought up the following recommendation of Council:—

"That the sum of £50 be granted for the purchase of Antiquities, the arrangement and registration of articles in the Museum, and for other matters connected with the department of Antiquities."

The question having been put, it was moved as an amendment, by Professor Haughton, and seconded by Professor Jellet—

"That it be recommended to the Council to omit all the words following the word 'Museum'."

A division being called for, it was found that ten members voted for the amendment, and twenty-three against it; it was therefore declared lost.

The original motion was then put, and carried.

Read—Letters of acknowledgment from Professor Clausius and Mr. Albert Way, on their election as Honorary Members.

The following presentations were made:—

"Limerick, its History and Antiquities, Ecclesiastical, Civil, and Military, from the Earliest Ages," by Maurice Lenihan: from the Author.

"Astronomical and Meteorological Observations made at the Radcliffe Observatory, Oxford, in the Year 1863," Vol. XXIII.: from the Radcliffe Trustees.

Fig. 3.

Characters on an Inscribed Cromleac, near Macroom, County Cork.

Fig. 4.

Cromleac near Rathkenny House, County Meath.

[View—looking East.]

Fig. 5.

View of Upper Surface of Inscribed Cromlech near Rathkenny House, County Meath.